

WASTAGE OF COAL.

Since I took office I am pleased to say that the problem of wastage of slack coal has undergone a complete transformation. In both the Waikato and Southland districts, where the position was most acute, the coal-mining companies, in response to my personal appeals, have entered into voluntary arrangements for controlling the sizes of screens. I wish to express to the companies my appreciation of their co-operation. Recent geological reports as to the limited extent of the coal resources of the country serve to strengthen my conviction and resolve that, so long as I remain in office, everything reasonably possible must be done to conserve those resources.

NEW AVENUES OF COAL-UTILIZATION.

My Department continues to keep in intimate touch with the latest developments abroad in hydrogenation and other processes for the extraction of oil from coal.

Further work has been undertaken on the survey of our coal resources.

The past year's operations have been mainly devoted to the Greymouth field, but the Geological Survey Department, which is controlled by my colleague, the Hon. the Minister in Charge of Scientific and Industrial Research, reports a serious shortage of suitable officers in New Zealand for such work. The investigations, which have so far been made, seem to indicate that the reserves of bituminous coal which can be economically worked are less than previously estimated.

The recent decision of the Government to establish an iron and steel industry makes the early completion of the survey of our bituminous fields a matter of imperative importance.

COAL-MINING LEGISLATION.

On my assumption of office I decided upon a thorough overhaul of all mining legislation. I do not desire my decision to be taken as an indication that I did not have a high regard for the existing statutes. I have always believed the Coal-mines Act of 1925 to be one of the finest pieces of legislation of its kind in the world. But conditions are continually changing, and we must advance with the times. Coal-mines Amendment Bills were therefore submitted to Parliament in both the years 1936 and 1937, and passed. The 1936 Amendment is a short measure of six sections only, but the 1937 Amendment comprises thirty-two sections, the more important requirements of which are set out in the following summary:

No person can now be appointed as manager, underviewer, or fireman-deputy until he is twenty-three years of age, and all underviewers and firemen-deputies must be re-examined every five years in gas-testing. The minimum age of employment underground in a coal-mine has been raised from fourteen years to sixteen years.

Except where in the opinion of the Minister of Mines it would be unreasonable to require it, a weighbridge must be installed at every mine where the wages of the miners are computed according to the weight of coal got by them. Where it is agreed that payment shall still be by measure or gauge, the method of measuring or gauging is to be decided by an Inspector of Weights and Measures.

Plans must now be made of all coal-mines with underground workings. Previously it was only necessary to have proper plans of mines where more than six men were employed.

Previously only the stoppings between the main intake and the main return airways were required to be built of non-inflammable material. An Inspector can now require the stoppings between the intake and return airways in any ventilating district to be built of non-inflammable material, and he has power to state the material of which they are to be constructed and their design.

To ascertain the percentage of inflammable gas normally present in the air of a coal-mine, an Inspector must take six samples. Previously these samples had to be taken at intervals of not less than a fortnight, but by the amending Act a sample can now be taken twenty-four hours after the previous one has been taken.